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AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

APPROPRIATIONS

BANKING, HOUSING, AND URBAN AFFAIRS

VETERANS' AFFAIRS

COMMITTEES:

June 27, 2013

The Honorable Tom Vilsack Secretary U.S. Department of Agriculture 1400 Independence Avenue, SW Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

I find it incredulous that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) would defy the authorized use of scarce Cooperative Extension Service resources to divert taxpayer dollars to promote the health care law.

In a speech to the National Rural Assembly on June 25, 2013, Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Sebelius referenced a "special contract" between HHS and USDA. Sadly, the health care law already contains a plethora of special deals and carve-outs such that it does not need yet another one. Nonetheless, the next day, the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA) posted a grants notice for up to \$795,455 of cooperative extension resources to conduct outreach to promote the health care law.

As you are well aware, I strongly opposed passage of the health care law because it fails to produce the health care reforms Americans deserved. It will ultimately make health care less affordable for many Americans and diminish the quality of their care. USDA should not use its resources to promote that law and, in fact, is not authorized to do so. Congress specifically denied requested funding for implementation of the health care law at both HHS and the Internal Revenue Service. Instead of abiding by Congress' Constitutional power of the purse, the Administration has turned to shaking down private organizations and diverting funding from essential activities.

At the same time, you have claimed that sequestration and a shrinking discretionary budget make it more difficult for USDA to exercise the responsibilities tasked to it by Congress. Yet, instead of prioritizing taxpayer dollars at USDA to concentrate on your core responsibilities, you have chosen to squander almost a million dollars on promoting Obamacare. Unfortunately, no amount of taxpayer-funded public relations can transform bad policy into good policy.

Cooperative extension is meant to enhance the competitiveness of U.S. agriculture and the food industry as well as supporting agriculture education for the next generation of rural Americans through programs like the 4-H youth development program. The purposes of USDA research, extension, and education have nothing to do with promotion of the health care law.

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Those purposes authorized by Congress are clearly articulated in 7 USC § 3101. Nowhere in these purposes is there a reasonable justification for using land-grant extension service funds to, as stated in NIFA's request for applications, focus education and outreach efforts on consumers to encourage "their participation in their State Marketplace Exchange."

I request all documents related to your "special contract" with HHS, including any promotional or outreach efforts beyond the grants notice published on June 26, 2013. In addition, please provide a list of extension services that will receive less funding or did not receive funding in FY 2013 to pay for Obamacare promotion. With USDA's current budget situation and your previous threats of furloughs and cancelled services, how is it possible that you have almost \$800,000 in unobligated funds only two months before the end of the fiscal year?

This profligate use of scarce resources will certainly make it more difficult to defend funding for land-grant university extension against those in Congress who wish to reduce it. Earlier this week, you indicated that farm groups and rural advocates should show "outrage" in situations like these, and your diversion of scarce USDA resources for the purpose of carrying out a law HHS is charged to implement is outrageous indeed. USDA should immediately cancel this "special contract" and any associated spending plans.

As a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I am committed to ensuring that taxpayer dollars are used responsibly and in a way that reflects the intent of Congress, and I intend to offer an amendment to prohibit your agency from abusing funding in this manner. I look forward to your prompt attention to these concerns, corrective action and response.

Sincerely,

Mike Johanns

United States Senator

Mile Johnson

cc: Land-Grant Colleges and Universities

The Honorable Kathleen Sebelius, Secretary of Health and Human Services